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Impact of Colonization on Perception of Prostitution in India

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Abstract:

This paper explores how colonization had a multifaceted and profound impact on the perception and organization of prostitution in India. The colonial authorities simplified this very spectrum of work and imposed the category that led to stigmatization. Authorities also used the spread of venereal illnesses to justify the regulation and coercive control of women engaged in sex work and reinforce racist ideologies. The important cultural roles played by women engaged in this spectrum of work, for instance, the courtesans, were redefined as they were stripped of their cultural significance. However, it wasn't just colonialism but the amalgamation of Brahmanical and national ideologies into Victorian standards of propriety that shaped the image of the prostitute. This paper analyses the current academic literature on how each of these factors, from the redefinition of sex work and the racialization of its organization to the impact of nationalist and Brahmanical patriarchy in the stigmatization of sex work, impacted and changed the entire practice of sex work in India.

Keywords: sex work, colonization, prostitution, patriarchy, women.

Introduction

Prostitution is said to be one of the most radically transformed practises during colonialism in India. However, contemporary discourses on prostitution mostly look at simplistic and dualistic questions of chaste/unchaste and agency/victim, neglecting the impact of colonization in placing prostitution within these very binaries. Since imperial power has been linked to sexual control, colonial domination necessitates the regulation of female bodies, especially those seen as "transgressive". This makes the very category of "prostitution" a crucial area of study because it is in this label of transgression that the colonizer also generates racist boundaries which become so entrenched that they cannot be undone. The intimacy of this category comes to reveal a central anxiety of not just colonial politics, but also the formation of national identities, which are inextricably linked.

This paper will thus attempt to discuss the impact of colonization in shaping how the notion of prostitution was both shaped and perceived during colonial rule in India. The question in itself can be answered through a plethora of contradictory, nuanced, and pressing reasons and arguments. However, the paper identifies specifically four aspects that it takes as the most implicating. It touches upon the very notion of defining the prostitute, then delves into the impact of venereal illnesses that led to the introduction of regulated prostitution, the racialization of this organization, and finally, the submersion of British notions of impropriety into Hindu nationalist and Brahmanical ideals of forming the very image of the prostitute. In doing so, the paper attempts to weave several academic texts to analyse and provide a link between these aspects that cannot be seen as completely separate from one another.

The “category” of prostitution

It is crucial to understand that within the context of pre-colonial India, sex work never existed within one single category, let alone within the label of prostitution- in fact, there was no one term that encapsulated fully, the spectrum of sex work that women were engaged in. However, the imperialist vision and expansionary aims necessitated understanding and knowing the nitty-gritty of how things operate within a colonized region. Pertaining to the fact that imperial power is closely tied to sexual dominance and women remain at the center of debates around sexuality, it is not surprising that one of the most recurring domains that authorities sought to scrutinize were practices that involved women. The cultural differences in these practices laid the basis for moral judgment and anything that could not be understood in Western terms was tamed and simplified.

In her article, Erica Wald discusses how the category of prostitution too, was informed by this very simplification. She discusses how this category was both imposed and expanded during British rule in India because of colonial anxieties towards groups of women that didn't simply fit this category. “Women who participated in certain practices which had no equivalent in Europe were identified as immoral” (Wald 1478). This included women engaged in a spectrum of work, including but not limited to courtesans, temple dancers, and the nautch girls for whom sex work was only a tiny portion of their duties with a large portion serving cultural, social as well as religious functions. In pre-colonial India, these women were not placed in the same category but rather seen in a hierarchy whereby only the *bazaar* sex workers marked the bottom of the ladder.

Wald suggested that the implications of this were that as much as the category of prostitution was defined, it was also permeable, meaning that it became easy to label any and

every woman that did not fit into Victorian standards of propriety as unchaste, thus legitimizing control over her sexuality. Like Wald, Amrita Pande in “In “(De)coding Loose women in Colonial Archives”, argues that this had effects not just towards women engaged in sex work, but any and every woman because it became increasingly convenient for confining them in the private sphere. “Any woman worker, involved in a livelihood generating activity (in public space), could be controlled via the threat of being classified as a prostitute” (6) Pande attested. More so, as the stigmatization of prostitutes found a place among the larger public, it created a surge of moral panic, normalizing blaming these women for other societal concerns such as broken marriages.

Wald provides the example of the nautch girls, who were called upon to sing and dance at public and private functions as well as temple devadasis who were girls trained in song and dance to perform in temple rituals and rites. The latter were symbolically married to the deity and were engaged primarily in preparing food, and garlands and cleaning the temple. They were seen as performing a religious role and had permitted and carefully regulated sexual relations with sons of affluent Brahmin households. However once recognized as a “prostitute”, their cultural and religious functions ceased to exist. Here, Amrita Pande provides an interesting insight into how the debates around devadasis constitute of important binaries between “proper and improper sexual activities as well as true and false religion” (7). The Devadasi was said to only serve Brahmin men and her duties too, even though identified as respectable within the religion, were shunned culturally. Pande claims that the reformation of the devadasis was not just a result of imperialist domination, but also an attempt by Brahmans to generate “modern” forms of Hinduism that were influenced again by colonial notions of viewing Hinduism as barbaric. The paper further explores broader consequences of the integration of Brahmanical norms with colonial imperialist ambitions in later sections.

Venereal illnesses, contagious acts and its impact on sex workers

Two factors become incredibly crucial to investigate when discussing the change in the organization of sex work in itself- the spread of venereal illnesses and the imposition of legislative acts. This is because these analyses show how colonial control over sexual regulation was justified and legitimized, and how this control itself served as a symbol for racist ideas about “fixing” a culture, wherein power over women's bodies served as a symbol of control over culture as a whole. It also helps us understand how prostitution in itself was organized racially, highlighting again the white supremacist anxieties and the racialized framework that laid the very base of such organization.

During that time, the increased colonial anxieties towards mixed-race progenies stigmatized long-term and marital affairs between European men and Indian women. This resulted in an increased emphasis on the organization of prostitution as a heterosexist alternative. In “Women in Cantonments: Evolution of Regulated Military Prostitution in Colonial India”, Sonia Mandal argues that this led to the enforcement of laws that not only restricted prostitution exclusively for the military but also introduced a system of regulation within the military cantonments (3). This was the Umbrella Act of 1864 or the then “cantonment act”. Mandal provides a detailed account of how under this system, women engaged in sex work were isolated from the larger society to be kept in cantonments and “bred” to service soldiers near military bases.

By the mid-19th century, there were over fifty military cantonments in India (Mandal) with areas marked as red-light zones or the *laal bazaars*. This is crucial to understand because the implementation of state-regulated prostitution at such a massive scale drastically changed the way prostitution was operated in India as it generated new forms and patterns of running a brothel. More so, it also legitimized state intervention in the private domain of sex in a massive scale, something that was not witnessed before in these regions. It allowed the justification of sexual control, especially of women’s bodies, as a means to ensure imperial power.

At the same time, venereal illnesses were proliferating among soldiers at accelerating rates, increasing the need to regulate sexual activities even more. To ensure that the spread of venereal illnesses did not compromise British expansionist interests, the contagious diseases act was passed. As part of this act, there were several “lock” hospitals established to ensure consistent medical check-ups of sex workers. This, not only legitimized a heavy surveillance system for “medical” inspection of prostitutes that served the soldiers but also propagated their stigmatization. Mandal argues that this laid a framework for how these women could and should be treated, as the connotation attached to them of a potential medical hazard justified the hostile means to keep them under “supervision” and intruding in their private sphere.

We cannot neglect that such stigma was directed only towards native women as it was informed by racist ideologies that viewed them as “inherently promiscuous and disease-rife” (Mandal 9). Hence, such regulation also aided in the solidification of this very narrative. The nature of the organization of cantonments in itself, with three separate regiments for white army men, white infantry ranks, and Indian soldiers, reveals how these very racist boundaries were now institutionalized. Hence, the regulation acts and its subsequent new establishments were emblematic of heterosexist colonial domination and hegemony. Through Mandal’s article, we are able to understand why prostitution as a whole was not banned until the very end of colonial

rule- because it functioned “as a symbol of British colonial superiority over the Indians, typecast as effete and effeminate” (8).

This is not to say that such inspection systems were not present in India before British rule. In “Venereal disease, prostitution, and politics of empire”, Philippa Levine argued that such systems were in place through civil legislation since 1805 when the first “lock hospital” was established. However, Levine claims that under colonial rule, it came to be uniformized and broadened to a massive scale and became more explicit. Even though similar acts were imposed in Britain itself, the very nature of how they were implemented was different. For instance, in India, unlike in Britain, military and civil authorities could dictate where prostitute women may live (587) and there was a ban on their public solicitation (588). Such differences in legislation and the distinctiveness of the system in India also reveal the crystallization of racial boundaries.

The ramifications were ideological as they were tangible and structural. Levine identifies how stereotypical generalizations were constantly made by colonial authorities about civil attitudes of nonchalance towards prostitution and the association of the disease with race was heightened. Hence, she argues that the result of this was that prostitution not only came to be recategorized in terms of gender but also in terms of race. Thus, in treating the “illness”, the authorities also sought to “fix” this very race that was in desperate need of civilization.

The Courtesan Culture

These arguments can be elucidated in depth, through the analysis of a specific group of women engaged in practises that fell under sex work but were also marked by cultural significance- the courtesans. Although sex work marked a part of their work, they had important cultural duties to cater to. Later, however, they were forced into the category of prostitution which significantly changed the courtesan culture and their organization.

Thus, the courtesans are an important group to integrate into this discourse because it is through them that we can highlight the complexities within the very spectrum of sex work in pre-colonial and colonial India.

To understand the women in the so community, this paper will thus examine Veena Talwar Oldenburg’s “The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India”. In the article, Oldenburg traces the implication of both the redefinition of prostitution and the Contagious disease acts on the courtesans, the *tawaiifs*, of Lucknow. The article mentions how the courtesans were quite distinct from the later defined category of “prostitution” in terms of their duties, which included but were not limited to performing dances and musical acts and maintaining the courtly

traditions of the Kingdom by training sons of the gentry in social etiquette. They were only "kept" by a select clientele whom they served. The very fact that they were accredited for upholding the norms in Lucknow reveals that they were not seen as "ill-repute" or as opposed to "respectability", at least in pre-colonial Lucknow.

The article succinctly summarizes a series of actors at play that led to a massive transformation within this category of women during colonial rule. First, the British annexation of the Kingdom of Awadh ended the royal patronage of courtesans (Oldenburg 260) in 1856. There was also a heavy imposition of fines and penalties on them for their role in the sepoy rebellion of 1857. Since the recategorization of the term prostitute now involved these women, they were also stigmatized for the spread of venereal diseases, their courts were constantly inspected and they were frequently sent for medical examinations. The cantonment act also led to the relocation of these women to the military cantonments as per the convenience of European soldiers. As a result of being unable to afford courts, their functions were now reduced to only sex work, "stripping it off of its cultural function" (266).

Oldenburg places the courtesans as active agents in society with agency as opposed to passive victims of their situations in the pre-colonial times by emphasizing how these women could "manipulate" men for their means" and "enjoyed opulent living", (Oldenburg 260). In an attempt to contrast their status to other women who were also engaged in sex work, she almost romanticizes their organization. Although other scholars argue that courtesans enjoyed "matricentric privileges", they emphasize on Brahminical norms of honor and shame that placed upper-class courtesans in an auspicious yet marginalized place even in pre-colonial India (Whitehead 49) that Oldenburg neglects.

Nationalism, Brahmanical patriarchy, and the figure of the prostitute

While there is no denying that the implications of the imperial rule have been devastating in stigmatizing and marginalizing these women, it would also be equally ignorant to imply that it was only the imperial rule that tarnished their otherwise empowered status. Many scholars, in fact, suggest it is important to look at the complex process that combined Brahmanical patriarchy, along with imposed imperialist notions of propriety to shape ideas of respectability in colonial and post-colonial India. It is important to do so because perceptions about respectability impacted how the category of prostitution in itself was marginalized.

Brahmanical patriarchy as coined by Uma Chakravarti is the dominant hierarchal structure existing since ancient India in which both caste and gender come to form the basis of the struggle for the intersectional experience of oppression, emphasizing the idea that the two

cannot be deemed as autonomous but often interact to form a superstructure (Omvedt 187). Such norms and beliefs were legitimized by the legacy of Hindu beliefs, most of which were reconstructed during colonialism. In “Towards a Theory of ‘Brahmanic Patriarchy’”, Omvedt reveals that especially norms that dealt with restrictions on women’s mobility evolved to form newer ideals of the “Modern” Hindu women that granted them some space for resistance, while still retaining some of the Brahmanic Hindu values. This led to the emergence of a particular nationalism that, despite its intentions to transcend caste-based values, ended up both destroying and crystallizing them because it was mostly sustained by the imposition of the retained Brahmanic standards on the lower caste.

The use of women’s bodies to maintain and generate national identities was prominent in both Brahmanical and Victorian hegemonies, even though they differed in the ways in which this was employed. Like Omvedt, Judy Whitehead in “Bodies Clean and Unclean” also draws similarities between both these structures and terms them as “symbolically parallel” as they were both class-stratified and patriarchal. The notions of purity and pollution were equally crucial even in this form of hegemony that based its foundations on the discrimination against the “untouchable” caste. Whitehead identifies how marriages between the upper and the lower castes were also very much regulated (45). Thus, the interaction between these dogmas led to multiple debates on appropriate and inappropriate forms of femininity.

Whitehead argues that since Victorian ideologies rendered the entire culture, especially Indian women as inherently promiscuous, the image of a “mother” figure was pushed by Hindu nationalists as well as the Brahman patriarchs to oppose this and claim a “respectable” identity. Hence, amidst India’s attempt to assert its own identity, the imposition of Victorian ideas of propriety, and the development of new Brahmanic ideals, notions of “respectable femininity” were being formed, at the heart of which lay the control of women’s sexuality. As a result of this, as the author identified, the figure of the prostitute had to be “proletarianized and marginalized to be defined by disciplinary institutions of illegality” (46). We can understand that these attitudes became entrenched within nationalist movements too, as nationalist reformers introduced actual laws suppressing courtesans around the 1920s and 1930s. The implication of these impositions was the solidification of the binary: pure and impure, chaste and unchaste, respectable and non-respectable women. Nationalist and independence movements undertook the notion of this newly reformed “Mother India” as its distinct imagery confirming this binary, with the representation of the noble Indian in contrast to the “other”,

promiscuous women. Thus, in attempting to contrast and oppose the Victorian notions of feminine propriety for Indian women, the Hindu nationalists ironically underscored the same, even if the processes and methods to do so were different.

Conclusion

Thus, the paper identifies that defining the category of “prostitution” in the first place was marked by heterosexist and racist notions of “salvaging” India from its cultural practises as well as simplifying it so as to make control convenient. It discusses the impact of this codification along with regulations, the reorganization of how prostitution was operated, and the formation of the image of the Hindu woman on the marginalization of prostitutes. However, it also acknowledges that albeit colonial struggles of retaining power exerted much force upon society at large, the influence of pre-existing hegemonies such as Brahmanical patriarchy and the need to assert independent national identity also cannot be ignored. In doing so, it also attempts to move away from victim/agency approaches when discussing sex work in pre-colonial India which were themselves marked by hierarchy, especially in the case of courtesans and devadasis.

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